

# A Two-Dimensional R. L. S.

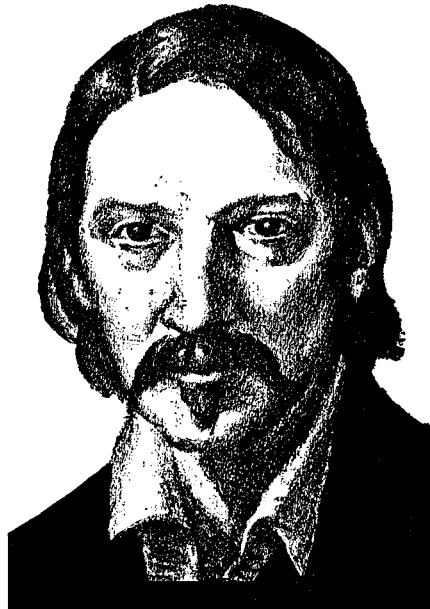
NO MORE A STRANGER. By Anne B. Fisher. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. 1946. 265 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JEAN C. S. WILSON

TO RECREATE a period that is past and a time that is gone and to people it with figures of fancy and dream that never existed beyond the imagination of an author requires consummate skill such as John Lloyd Balderston exhibited in "Berkeley Square," but to take an historical person whose biographical record is available in any public library and attempt to portray thoughts, feelings, and conversations at a given moment in an actual lifetime requires the knowledge of human nature and the technical ability of a Shakespeare or at the very least of a Strachey. Unfortunately Mrs. Fisher has chosen to cast her discussion of Robert Louis Stevenson's brief stay in Monterey, California, in the form that Shakespeare and Strachey found so successful—fictionalized biography.

From the first page to the last I found this disturbing and distracting, for Mrs. Fisher has picked a particularly difficult period to tell us what Stevenson said, how he felt, and in general the tenor of his thoughts from day to day. "No More A Stranger" covers the autumn months of 1879 in which Stevenson had momentarily broken with his family and his comfortable existence in Scotland and the continent, to follow his future wife Fanny Osbourne to Monterey, where she was staying with her children, Isobel and Lloyd. This must have been a trying time for them all, since Mrs. Osbourne had not then decided to divorce her first husband and marry Stevenson. A verbatim report of the relationship between Mrs. Osbourne and Stevenson under such circumstances seems an almost impossible task. But it is around this basic situation and against a cinematic background of the semi-tropical foliage, adobe houses, and sun-baked streets of the old Spanish town of Monterey that Mrs. Fisher spins her account of Stevenson's trials and vicissitudes as, to use her phrase, a pauper lover.

Under her treatment neither Stevenson nor Fanny Osbourne came alive for me in the sense of three-dimensional people. Both of them seem rather like portraits on a wall that exhibit the same surfaces daily. The outlines of life are there, but the changes of mood, expression, and thought which are inherent in vitality are missing. Mrs. Fisher's por-



"No More a Stranger" tells Robert Louis Stevenson's "vicissitudes as a pauper lover."

trayal of Stevenson is less static than her portrayal of Mrs. Osbourne, but many of the essential elements of his nature are lacking. There is no mention of Stevenson's strong Calvinistic streak which had so much to do with the purity and restraint of his literary style and, even more important, was the direct source of his serious personal preoccupation with the forces of good and evil. Nowhere in her portrait do we find Stevenson's passion for leaf and twig, stream and hill, yet at this period he had just completed his pastoral "Travels with a Donkey" and "An Inland Voyage."

During all but this particular time

in his life Stevenson was a devoted son and extraordinarily close to his parents, but because Mrs. Fisher writes of him at his one moment of estrangement the casual reader might well feel that Stevenson's family associations were unhappy. The reverse, of course, is true. After his marriage Stevenson and his wife returned to Scotland, where they became part of a warm family circle that was untouched by time and distance and broken only by death. The author's truest and most engaging picture of Stevenson is as the untidy dilettante artist who has not yet come to terms with life.

Mrs. Fisher handles her local color as one steeped in the traditions and history of the region she describes. The minor characters, the boarding-house and saloon keepers, the occasional visiting ranchers, the whalers, the Indians, the drifters, all are well and realistically drawn. Indeed the shifting scenes of Monterey itself, the descriptions of the effect of everyday occurrences on the lives of the inhabitants, present an unusual picture of community life at the close of the seventies. And so while "No More a Stranger" is not a penetrating character study, it is eminently satisfactory as regional literature and as a factual narrative of Stevenson's little-known life in Monterey. At a time when all of us are looking backward to our roots for strength and guidance in our present politically difficult day, the Stanford University Press should be complimented on the publication of such a book. Minuscule though it is, Mrs. Fisher in her use of background does give us a slice of Americana.

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## Meanwhile

By Hortense Flexner

BETWEEN the equation and the flash,  
The wheat will grow, the plane take off for France,  
Between the desk-light and the total ash,  
The typing hands will flicker and the deal  
Be closed "effective in a year";  
Swiftly, between the concept and the crash,  
Man webbed in steel  
But cherishing romance,  
Spins in the sky, sends rays to breach the moon,  
Collects antiques, invents new kitchen gear,  
Visits the zoo and smiles at the baboon.  
Yet in the secret mind  
That signals mystic weather storm or fair,  
A shadow falls at noon,  
Its meaning chill, depressingly combined  
With such odd words as "death," "destroy," "decease";  
An echo or a presence now aware  
Of ancient things—a pyramid, the crease  
In mummy linen, or the spare  
Unbreakable skeleton of Greece.

# "King of Poets"

THE LIFE OF EDMUND SPENSER.  
By Alexander C. Judson. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. 1945. 238 pp. \$4.50.

Reviewed by LESLIE HOTSON

IT is curious that a new life of the poet of "The Faerie Queene" strikes the reader as more topical and timely than the last "new" one, which appeared in 1884. Yet with our fresh experience of a continuing war against conquering and encroaching despotisms, we can understand, to a degree impossible to our fathers and grandfathers, the hopes, fears, and grim resolution of the Elizabethans.

Edmund Spenser's life spanned almost the whole of Elizabeth's reign. It witnessed all the vicissitudes of an unrelenting war, declared and undeclared, to defend the English heritage of freedom from destruction at the hands of a Continental autocracy—an autocracy which bulked far greater than England in might, and which certainly lagged far behind her in the development of civil liberty. Yet neither Spain's mines of gold and silver, her military renown, nor the ideological strength of her crusading fervor sufficed to convince England that resistance was hopeless and appeasement the only course. On the contrary. With a boldness which raised wonder in friend and foe, with a skill uncanny and a tenacity incredible, Elizabeth and her Englishmen blocked, fainted, raided—and in the end outfought and bankrupted her massive opponent. If she and they had not found the heart to stand fast against all odds in the long fight to a decision, there would be today no democratic British Commonwealth of Nations, no United States of America. The roll of the American Legion should lead off with *Elizabeth, Grenville, Drake, Hawkins, Raleigh*.

And *Spenser*. No one can read "The Faerie Queene" without entering the heroic atmosphere it breathes of devotion, resolve, and national dedication to the ideal.

Since Dr. Grosart's "Life of Spenser," published more than sixty years ago, long steps have been taken in Elizabethan studies. Notable among the discoveries are new facts about this poet's work and life, trophies in the main of a devoted and energetic company of American scholars inspired by the late Edwin Greenlaw. The fruits both factual and critical are now exploited in the stately variorum edition, completed by the present one-volume life by Alexander C. Judson. It was time that the new ma-



—Blond Gallery

"The roll of the American Legion should lead off with *Elizabeth, Grenville, Drake, Hawkins, Raleigh. And Spenser.*"

terial, married with the old, should be put into the hands of the public. We open this handsome book with keen anticipation.

The author has approached his subject with enthusiasm, reverent sentiment, and a diffidence betrayed by his grateful enumeration of the authorities who read and criticized his manuscript. His conservatism is deliberate, and perhaps imposed by a scholar's determination to forestall possible attacks. Yet we miss the sparkle which only a well-ticketed foray or two into theory could provide. Such queries as "Did his eleven college mates guess that he alone of the twelve would win real distinction in life?" and "Spenser's wife . . . had perhaps accompanied him to England; if so, did the long period of waiting prove as tedious to her as to her husband?" will not be assailed as adventurous speculations.

There is little but praise for the skill with which the augmented biographical data have been woven into a tissue enriched and illuminated by adroit and happy quotation from Spenser's works. But this biographer makes a larger claim—"I have undertaken to place him in his environment"—and his performance challenges examination.

To let the modern reader savor the Elizabethan environment, the modern author must be steeped in their thoughts, and draw and draw again, as Neale has brilliantly shown, on the Elizabethans themselves. Know what they are saying, and then let them talk. It is wisdom to know ourselves for interpreters weak and fallible. Our unassisted minds are hopelessly modern.

When we look into Dr. Judson's description of Spenser's enlightened schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, we are startled to be told that Mulcaster "believed in self-expression." Was "self-expression" for children ever thought of before the days of progressive education? What Mulcaster *did* believe in (and this put him far ahead of his time) was the discovery and training of aptitudes: something very different. If one of us could witness one of Mulcaster's lessons in penmanship or drawing given to a boy who showed aptitude for those arts, "self-expression" would occur to us no more than it occurred to them.

Again, Dr. Judson exerts himself to prove that Spenser owed a special debt to his notable teacher. He ostensibly quotes Mulcaster as saying that "boys with a gift for poetry . . . should study the poets." On the contrary: what Mulcaster *did* say was that the works of the poets had no place in a school. He recommended the inclusion in textbooks of carefully selected verses of Horace to teach manners, and religious verses cunningly imitated from the "prophane" poets. Of such grown men as are determined to be poets, he remarks: "Some veins be rapt [i.e., entranced, transported], and will needs prove poets; leave them 'The Art of Poetry,' and the whole books and arguments of poets."

Stranger still is Dr. Judson's next passage: "Moreover, Mulcaster's theory of poetry was strikingly like Spenser's practice: when poets write soberly, without disguise, declares Mulcaster, they are not true poets, but only when they 'cover a truth with a fabulous veil.'" Is not the fact completely the reverse of this? Poets as poets are covered with Mulcaster's ridicule. Their fabulous inventions are read by learned men only to be laughed at, and "to behold what bravery [i.e., display, finery] enthusiasm inspireth." True, they are not dangerous when they write unadorned didactic verses; but at such times they are not properly "poets." It is only when they cover a truth with a fabulous veil that they are true poets and must be kept away from the young. We must beware, however, even with religious verses, "that we plant not any poetical fury in the child's habit. For that rapt inclination is too ranging of itself, though it be not helped forward where it is." It looks as though Spenser's wild wits becharmed him into a "true poet" of fable and fancy in spite of all Mulcaster could do to save him.

The most successful and valuable of Dr. Judson's chapters are those which trace Spenser in Ireland. Here we find more quotation from contemporary sources, and a far more vivid